

# County officials fish for answers on safe drinking water

■ WSSC concerned but not alarmed over abnormal fish in Potomac River

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Increasing numbers of male fish found in the Potomac River with eggs growing inside their sex organs have county officials asking questions about the safety of the area's drinking water.

Reports surfacing earlier this month about "intersex" fish, or male fish with immature eggs found in their testes, so alarmed County Councilwoman Nancy M. Floreen (D-At large) of Garrett Park that she held a briefing on the subject Thursday.

"I'm surprised there has not been a more visceral response [to the reports]," Floreen said at a discussion with Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission (WSSC) staffers.

WSSC produces drinking water for about 1.5 million people in Montgomery and Prince George's counties, primarily from water drawn directly from the Potomac River at the Potomac Water Filtration Plant on River Road.

WSSC officials said the abnormal fish have raised warning flags but that scientists lack hard evidence to

explain the phenomenon. For that reason, last year WSSC and other industry companies began lobbying for more federal government research into the problem.

Still, the situation is nothing to be overly concerned about.

"This is a very hot issue in the water industry and we're on top of it," said Tom Heikkinen, WSSC production team chief.

He said WSSC currently tests for 200 different contaminants in the raw water entering their plants and the finished product that enters water pipelines.

Since 2000, he said, the plant twice found suspected estrogenic compounds in raw river water but none in treated water.

Despite studying the problem since 1996, the Environmental Protection Agency has not set guidelines for estrogen compounds in water for water treatment plants and no longer funds research into it.

So recently, a consortium of water treatment plants and state government formed the Potomac River Basin Drinking Water Source Protection Partnership and funded a \$30 million study looking at the problem, said Mohammed Habibian, WSSC environmental scientist.

Floreen said she would look into ways the county could lend support, such as looking at campaigns to better

inform the public on ways to best dispose of unwanted medicine other than flushing it down a toilet. The topic will also be considered when the county reviews its water and sewer policies in the spring.

Interest in the abnormal fish began some six years ago after a United States Geological Survey study of 139 rivers and streams in 30 states found contaminants, many of them estrogenic, in 80 percent of the fish sampled. A similar survey last year in the Potomac River found abnormalities in all of the male small-mouth bass and more than half of large-mouth bass.

But it's one thing to find abnormalities and another to determine the cause, Habibian said.

Most likely, a class of pollutants called "endocrine disrupters" are short-circuiting healthy hormone production in the fish. The theory is that estrogens enter the water from a variety of sources, ranging from pesticides to personal care products to birth control pills flushed down toilets, he said.

Still, there is no "established link" between abnormal fish in a river and humans suffering ill health from drinking water from that river, he said.

"We should not be alarmed," Habibian said. "Whether we should be concerned is a different issue. At the cellular level...we are not that much different than fish."